

1999 ADDRESS BY STEVE GAW SPEAKER OF THE HOUSE

Good afternoon, and thank you for the trust you have shown in me by allowing me to serve as your Speaker. It is an honor to welcome you--the General Assembly, chosen by the citizens of this state to lead us into the 21st Century.

Congratulations for earning the trust and respect of your constituents who selected you to represent them here in this grand chamber of our State Capitol.

I want to recognize all the family and friends with us here today. Without their support, we would not be here. I especially want to recognize and thank my wife, Fannie, for her wonderful support.

It is our privilege to serve in the Missouri House as we bring a close to this century and look toward the next.

We are the General Assembly that will be leading our great state into the new millennium...amid much anticipation. A new century of new challenges and new opportunities is before us.

The anticipation of all that lies ahead in the next 100 years is built largely upon all that we have seen in the past 100 years--a period of time that has taken us from horses to jet engines...postal mail to e-mail...and nearly eliminated one of history's devastating diseases with a drop of medicine in a sugar cube.

As much as we might try, our minds cannot truly comprehend, nor our imaginations completely capture, all that could come about in the next century--a cure for cancer...vehicles that emit water rather than carbon monoxide...the ability to travel to other planets...or maybe even through time.

Stephen Hawking truly believes time travel is possible. This famous physicist--a researcher, author and professor at Cambridge University--predicts that scientists will someday in the foreseeable future be able to identify particles that travel faster than the speed of light and perhaps, even travel through time.

Could such discoveries someday allow mankind to travel backward or forward in time?

Nearly 35 years ago, I walked through the doors of a one-room school house, known as Sugar Creek, where I began first grade and would continue my education until junior high.

Most years, there were two of us in my grade, though once, because of a population explosion, we got up to four students.

In that small country school, one teacher taught between 30 and 35 students in eight grades. Needless to say, she had only a limited amount of time with each grade...and with each student. After her time with my small class, I would often wander over to a little library in the corner of the room.

There...on those shelves...I would find words that frequently filled the rest of each school day...stories that took me to different worlds...ideas that influenced the rest of my life.

I discovered books that took me to other places and times...stories about dinosaurs from long ago...stories about people like Martin Luther King Senior and Junior, and how education put a sharecropper's son on a

path that would someday change the world...and science fiction stories about space exploration and time travel.

Stephen Hawking believes we may be able to discover time travel in the century ahead, but I began traveling through time midway through this century...nearly 35 years ago...when I learned to read.

For thousands of years, we have been able to visit other worlds and other times through our minds and the words of others. With books and the written word, the universe is limitless.

I believe our visions for the future...for ourselves...for our families...for our state and nation...are born from the things we read when we are young.

With the ability to read, we gain access to the ideas of others...to places that others have seen...and people they have known. How much we learn in school is dependent upon something we too often take for granted--the ability to read.

Research in education shows that third grade is the critical time for a child to have learned how to read, and that ability is the foundation upon which learning takes place.

How can a child who is not proficient at reading learn of the great nations that have come before us...know the foresight of our founding fathers...understand the successes and mistakes of our past?

How can a child, who is not reading well by the third grade, explore the basics of science--biology, chemistry and physics?

How can a child ever hope to contribute to the new frontier of the 21st Century if they cannot absorb the tremendous information we have learned in this century...available to us now in the written word through books and our newest information source--the Internet?

Some might be led to believe the advent of new technology makes it appropriate for us to shift our focus away from the basics of reading, writing, math, social studies and science.

I believe that it's more important now than ever before, for our children to build strong foundations so they may be prepared and able to learn about the new and the old...so the computers in which we invest for our classrooms will not lie idle or be used as recess playgrounds.

Children who cannot read are not able to fully and successfully function in the small society of their school classrooms, and they certainly will not be able to successfully participate in the much larger society that awaits.

One statistic illustrates that point like no other. Seventy percent of inmates in our country's prisons are functionally illiterate--unable to write a basic personal business letter or read a bus schedule.

Let us find a way to ensure that every third grader who can, has the ability to read at grade level before the fourth grade begins.

The child that has not learned to read by that time will not be prepared to take on the century's new challenges and opportunities.

That child--although able to push the buttons on a computer--will not be able to fully benefit from the wealth of knowledge offered by the Internet...That child--even when given the best books money can buy--will not be able to learn about the wonders of the world...fulfill their potential for the future...or contribute to the discoveries of the new millennium.

Our work in this chamber last year focused on the needs of our state's children and their families. The foundation of Missouri...the very foundation of America...is built upon the working family.

1998 was one of the most successful legislative sessions in recent history. We provided tax relief that will especially benefit working families and senior citizens.

An increase in the state income tax deduction for dependents and property tax relief for seniors will put more money in the pockets of those who need it the most.

The Children's Health Initiative will help provide medical care to the thousands of children who have been uninsured because their working parents did not have access to affordable health insurance.

We have made Missouri safer for our families with the toughest laws in the nation to battle our state's substantial methamphetamine problem and keep sexual predators off the streets.

The Early Childhood Education Program will help Missouri's preschool aged children get a head start in life and enter school ready to learn.

And several new programs, including Advantage Missouri, will make college more affordable for working families.

As we prepare for the next millennium, we must remain focused on the importance of our foundation--and continue to address the needs of the working family.

Already living in a state with one of the lowest overall tax burdens in the entire nation, we have the opportunity to provide even more broad-based tax relief to our working families and senior citizens.

At the same time we need to keep watch on our state's budget and practice fiscal conservatism. We must make sure that our state has the resources to continue to soundly operate well into the new century...so our covenant with our children's future will not be broken.

We must continue to stand up for our seniors--those who laid the foundation for us.

Following last year's expansion of property tax relief for seniors, let us consider a tax credit for pharmaceuticals to help our state's elderly afford the medications they need to live longer and healthier lives.

We must make sure our state is safer, especially for our senior citizens and children, by initiating a system of background checks for people who care for the elderly, as well as those who provide care for our kids.

And we need to put a stop to those who approach our senior citizens through telephone calls and door-to-door pitches to engage in fraudulent means to deceive and rob them of the money they have saved for their retirement years.

We must also work to keep Missouri sound. We need to continue creating more good paying jobs across our state.

Missouri continues to enjoy successful economic times. We finished 1998 with a near record 3.9 percent unemployment rate and an inflation rate of 1.5 percent, both lower than the national average.

More Missourians than ever are working, with a net total of 34,000 new jobs created in the state last year. And 348 companies expanded existing facilities or built new one during the past year.

While most of us are sharing in these good economic times, there are some who are not. Let us not forget parts of our urban core areas that continue to experience economic difficulties.

And our family farmers are facing tough times, with some of the lowest prices for their products this century. This session we must take a serious look at what we can do to help preserve this important way of life in Missouri.

Continuing our work from last session, let us work to solve the problem of access to affordable health insurance for Missouri farmers as well as small business owners and their employees throughout the state.

Improving education...securing safe homes and neighborhoods...encouraging economic growth...fighting for additional tax relief...preserving our family farms...providing access to good health care--this is the work that will build a solid foundation for the 21st century.

With it, we can travel courageously into the future...to our new frontier...to our great destiny.

Let us be on our way.